DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 396 486 EC 304 866

AUTHOR	Garnett, Katherine
TITLE	Thinking about Inclusion and Learning Disabilities: A Teacher's Guide.
INSTITUTION	Great Lakes Area Regional Resource Center.; South Atlantic Regional Resource Center, Plantation, FL.
SPONS AGENCY	Special Education Programs (ED/OSERS), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE	96
CONTRACT	H028A30004; H028A30005
NOTE	39p.; Based on the proceedings of Research on Classroom Ecologies: Implications for Inclusion of Children with Learning Disabilities Symposium (Bandera, TX, October 28-30, 1994).
AVAILABLE FROM	Council for Exceptional Children, Publications, 1920 Association Drive, Reston, VA 22091-1589 ($3).
PUB TYPE	Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Change Strategies; *Classroom Environment; *Educational Change; Elementary Secondary Education; *Inclusive Schools; *Learning Disabilities; Mainstreaming; Regular and Special Education Relationship; Resistance to Change; Student Needs; Student Placement; Teacher Role

ABSTRACT

This guide focuses on the inclusion of students with learning disabilities (LD) in general classrooms. The booklet is organized around six major concerns: (1) what general education classes are really like (their usual organization, their differences from one another, and their assumptions); (2) what classrooms are like for students with learning disabilities (typical general classroom characteristics as related to common characteristics of LD students); (3) the process of change and restructuring in schools and classrooms (results of changing the usual classroom ecology and structure, and effects on students); (4) difficulties in changing schools and classrooms; (5) the needs of students with learning disabilities (questions to consider in determining a student's educational placement); and (6) the purposes of special education for LD students. Recurring themes in serving LD students in inclusive settings are identified in a concluding section, focusing on the enormous complexity of schooling, the critical role of teachers, the value of collaboration, and the need to expect resistance to change. (DB)

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THINKING ABOUT INCLUSION AND LEARNING DISABILITIES: A TEACHER'S GUIDE

For teachers of children with learning disabilities, and for others deeply concerned with progress in teaching and learning

By Katherine Garnett

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THINKING ABOUT INCLUSION AND LEARNING DISABILITIES: A TEACHER'S GUIDE

This teacher's guide is based on the proceedings of a symposium convened to explore classroom ecologies and their effects on students with learning disabilities.

Research on Classroom Ecologies: Implications for Inclusion of Children with Learning Disabilities
October 28-30, 1994
Bandera, Texas

A symposium sponsored by:

Division for Learning Disabilities of the Council for Exceptional Children

Great Lakes Area Regional Resource Center

Illinois State Board of Education

South Atlantic Regional Resource Center

Texas Education Agency

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The development of this document was supported in part by the Great Lakes Area Regional Resource Center, Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio, and by the South Atlantic Regional Resource Center, Florida Atlantic University, Plantation, Florida as part of Cooperative Agreements #HO28A30004 and #HO28A30005 with the Office of Special Education Programs, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, U.S. Department of Education. The points of view expressed in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position or policy of the resource centers or the U.S. Department of Education. Nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Government.

Development of this document was also supported by the Illinois State Board of Education and the Texas Education Agency. The opinions expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of the Illinois State Board of Education and the Texas Education Agency.

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P R E F A C E

THIS GUIDE IS BASED ON A SYMPOSIUM THAT FOCUSED ON CLASSROOM ECOLOGIES AND LEARNING DISABILITIES.

While it is my intent to distill, synthesize and render "of use" the exchanges of this symposium, surely I have not got it all right and, just as surely, I have framed it within my own unseen assumptions. Still, I hope this version conveys much of the substance of the actual event —in ways that rouse insight, confirm wisdom, and spur helpful actions within classrooms.

As you will see, this is not simply a report about an important symposium. It is a shaping of information that came from multiple sources — from the prepared papers, from the presentations and prepared commentaries, from the lively discussions and from the informal chats over food and into the night, all of which formed the symposium event. I have shaped this rich fund of data, perspectives and insight into concrete suggestions and specific ideas for classroom practice. Further, I have proposed ways for colleagues in classrooms to collaborate. As I worked with the symposium material, it became increasingly clear that for educational change to be both beneficial and lasting, it must include strengthened collegial relations. We need one another's viewpoints.

Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched, we cannot know ourselves.

Adrienne Rich, *When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision*

INTRODUCTION

WHAT SYMPOSIUM?

The Division for Learning Disabilities (DLD) of the Council for Exceptional Children convened a symposium on classroom ecologies to explore the complex ways that classroom life affects students and teachers. The gathering was cosponsored by DLD, the Illinois State Board of Education, the Texas Education Agency, the Great Lakes Area Regional Resource Center, and the South Atlantic Regional Resource Center. It grew from a shared sense that we all need a far more comprehensive view of the complexities of classroom life, especially as these affect youngsters with learning disabilities.

WHO PARTICIPATED?

The symposium was a small gathering of educators, both university researchers and classroom teachers, many with long-standing concern for students with learning disabilities. The research programs represented are based in schools and classrooms across the country, the researchers having formed long-term alliances with teachers. Participants were from both general and special education and came with an uncommon variety of perspectives: behavioral, cognitive, constructivist, ethnographic, pragmatic, social anthropological and day-to-day classroomist. So, the voices of the symposium were varied, and the exchanges filled with information, illumination, cautions, stories, debate and puzzlement.

THE BROADER CONTEXT

Powerful pressures are being exerted on education. Schools are pelted with calls for reform, restructuring, equity, excellence, and inclusion—many, often competing, pressures to CHANGE. And, make no mistake, these pressures come from a sufficiently broad base that they will not go away and—for better or worse—they will have effects in districts, in schools and in classrooms.

It is not an overstatement to see this as a crucial time for American education, characterized by widespread dissatisfaction with "business as usual." Propelled by societal forces much broader than education itself (increased diversity, diminished resources, global shifts, national goals, political agendas, to name a few), both regular and special education are swept in a rising tide. Resulting changes are not likely to be altogether beneficial and, those that are for the better will not be simple

to sustain. At the same time, an opportunity for valuable change is here now, if we keep our heads about us and out of the sand.

HOW YOU FIT IN

You are a key player, because you are the closest to the action. Your participation, your voice — what you do in the day-to-day work of classrooms—is consequential. No top-down reforms will improve schooling or benefit the children in your charge without your actively contributing—by seeing more clearly what needs to change, shaping the process of change, and providing one another the small daily supports that sustain your new directions.

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Teachers, together with their principals and a handful of other frontline supporters, are the keepers of a school and classroom's culture. Largely unseen, the routine arrangements, activities and interactions you engage in shape your culture's norms, customs and climate with all its strengths and troubles. Sustained changes for the better within your local culture, however small they may seem, have incremental power. In the long run, they are a potent force for development, not today's fashionable illusion of change, but rather those small powerful steps marking real growth in your students, yourself, your colleagues, and life in schools.

WHY THIS SYMPOSIUM?
(the elephant stories)

At this critical period in American education, it seems both important and possible to influence the directions that change takes. But not without looking clearly at what actually happens in classrooms and schools, seeing beyond our hopes, our images and our rhetoric.

As symposium participants, we came together purposefully to broaden our usual perspectives... to see more of the elephant, as it were. Actually, there are two stories about this elephant. In one, each of three blind beggars clings to a piece of the elephant and constructs his version of the world centered on that piece. In the other story there is, in the midst of every living room, an elephant that everyone has agreed to "not see." Needless to say, the elephant dominates the living room, more so the more adamantly it goes unacknowledged. The premise of our classroom ecologies symposium was that each of us has hold of a part of the elephant, a dominating mastodon in our midst that we take so much for granted, we routinely do not see it.

what elephant?

The elephant is the great mass of our unseen assumptions, our beliefs about teaching and learning in schools, our "not seeing" the actual

situational influences as they operate incident by incident, lesson by lesson, day by day. "How things are" is so much the very fabric of school life that it seems nearly impossible to discern the patterns and threads, much less to consider a different weave. So it is with our elephants: manifested in our common routines, they obscure much of what is actually going on, what may most need to change, and what, right before our eyes, may be most amenable to changing.

SOME QUESTIONS

So, how to learn to see more of what's there? During the symposium, we swapped stories from our partial knowledge of classroom complexities, in particular seeking how these operate—with what benefits and what costs — for students with learning disabilities. The current penchant for increasing the inclusion of students with disabilities provided us with the foundation question: Inclusion into what? From this sprang more questions:

W H A T
are general education classrooms really like?

W H A T
are they like for students with learning disabilities?

W H A T
happens when schools/classrooms undergo a sustained process of change and are structured significantly differently?

W H Y
is changing schools and classrooms (and other cultural activities) so difficult?

W H A T
do students with learning disabilities really need?

W H A T
are the rightful purposes of special education for students with learning disabilities?

As we pooled views and information, questions inside questions kept surfacing and it became apparent that we have nowhere near all the answers. Schooling is enormously complex and the complexities do not yield to simple formulas for change. Still, there is information bearing on these questions. Though incomplete, available evidence is very interesting.

WHAT ARE GENERAL EDUCATION CLASSROOMS REALLY LIKE?

How are they organized? How different are they one from another?

The way classrooms "are"—how they are organized and run—has powerful effects on what happens in them: on such things as who initiates, what sorts of responding occurs, when knowledge is displayed, whether mistakes are valued, how face-saving tactics play out, to name a few. At the same time, the broad strokes of classroom operation are so familiar that it is extremely difficult to notice their effects on your students and yourself. Below are some of those broad common contours of classrooms. While we are all intimate with features listed here, is it possible to step back and consider them from the angle of someone who wishes to know, "Are these ways inevitable?"

1. Classrooms are crowded environments, arranged to maximize general, not close, observation of students.
2. They are busy places, filled with rapid interactions.
3. Mostly driven by clock time, they rarely operate in the flow of time. And yet, despite time pressure, much of students' classroom career is spent either waiting or being interrupted.
4. For students, classrooms are public arenas. The public spotlight can, at any moment, bare this child's failings (or that one's worthiness), making clear the official pecking order.
5. For teachers, classrooms are private domains, rarely encroached for any length of time or depth of observation by another adult.
6. Teacher talk predominates in classrooms, especially during times of intentional teaching. Student talk is minimal, especially during times of intentional learning.
7. Overwhelmingly, classroom instruction relies on whole group instruction, accompanied by large amounts of loosely overseen seatwork.
8. The instructional focus is largely at the activity level, with teachers' expressing satisfaction when "things are going well," with students enjoying themselves.
9. Checking in on students' performance is frequent, but uneven; probing individual students' understanding, providing instructive feedback or monitoring individual progress is rare.

These conditions determine so much of what happens in classrooms — the dynamics of discord and harmony, individuals' ways of engaging and resisting, this group's productivity, that child's inattention and more. Actually, it is not exactly the conditions themselves that are so potent, but rather the unexamined assumptions, the meanings, that both students and teachers act out through them. For example, teachers may assume that:

- in the main, students learn by having an expert leader (teacher) impart knowledge to them.
  That assumption could undergird the high levels of teacher talk, the widespread use of whole group instruction, the public spot-checking of whether this or that piece of knowledge got imparted.

Alternate assumptions might be:

- in the main, students learn when interactions with an expert (teacher) are genuine joint inquiries, rather than displays of students' knowledge.
  Or:
- students learn most by teaching someone else what they know and by keeping close track of their own progress.

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Such changes in the emphasis of underlying presumptions would rearrange classroom activities and relations, producing different results. This is not to argue for which organizing assumption is "better" (they all have merit), but rather to expose to view the tremendous pull of classroom features that embody unseen, or half-seen, assumptions.

Only when we change something about general classroom features can we see, by contrast, how profoundly they and our accompanying assumptions shape what's going on. Ever notice how the classroom radically shifts for Friday afternoon games: the teacher/student talk ratio, the engagement level and pecking orders? Friday board games radically alter roles and social rules, rearranging the classroom into clusters of students who self-pace activities, monitor one another and participate in a lot of task-focused talk, even calling on the teacher! In one way, of course, we all know this. But in another, it is invisible, because that's just how a game period is... at least on good Fridays. Yes, "that's how it is" (the thump of an unseen elephant).

So why aren't social studies lessons like that? Or reading periods? Or math time?

Could they be? Could story discussions be like "hot topic" student conversations? Could math class be reorganized into student pairs who explain to one another, calling on the teacher to arbitrate and clarify? Could the implicit "rules of the game" for social studies change radically (meaning, in an underlying way) so that individual students are not conceptually at sea?

The "ways of classrooms" in general is not, of course, the whole picture; there is much local variation. And, importantly, we always experience "how things are" as very particular, local, and specific... well, actually, quite different: here, in this school, with this year's group, or in my particular situation. Even so, classroom contours are amazingly similar across schools. New teachers quickly becoming enculturated and soon enough come to experience that "that's how things are." Differences tend to be variations on a theme, rather than significant departures. Numerous classroom studies document how widespread these features are. But then, look locally and see for yourself:

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How do teachers and students actually behave, relate, and conduct their activities—and with what effects?

How do students and teachers regard what they are doing and view one another—and with what effects?

IDEAS FOR YOU TO INVESTIGATE

Thrash out your responses to the list on page 5. Then decide on any that you hope are not operative in your classroom. For example:

- "I sure hope my kids don't spend all that much time waiting."
- "I wonder how much I actually do interrupt kids who are concentrating?"
- "Do I really take up all the talk space?"
- "Keesha fidgets a lot during discussions. What is she getting out of them and how does she see what we've been doing?"
- "What sort of feedback do I actually give José... and how often?"

Have a colleague sit in on periods of your class, collecting such information for you. And you sit in on her classes for her. Piece together your observations. From this, select one small change each and figure out how to help each other sustain it. Sometimes even a simple thing such as your after-lunch greeting—"So how's the feedback to José going?"—can provide sustaining nourishment. Keep little notes on what effects you see. Notes help the mind notice. They also anchor conversation in specifics.

Note: It might be wise to pick a small one and build it in daily. Working at the edges of "how things are" can alter your routines with a stability that may grow on you.

WHAT ARE CLASSROOMS LIKE FOR STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES?

How do general education classroom environments respond to individual differences and needs? How readily do teachers alter their forms of classroom organization; how readily do they modify approaches?

Common classroom conditions can and do affect many students adversely—to some degree, at one time or another, in one way or other—but, some students are especially vulnerable to classrooms' hazards (e.g., children of poverty, nonnative speakers, those with attention deficits). Students with learning disabilities are among the most vulnerable— at chronic risk for "not learning" under the aforementioned conditions, for long-term academic and social problems, and for lifelong debilitating side-effects of their classroom experiences.

Classrooms can be perilous in a number of ways for students with learning disabilities. Remember:

1. *Classrooms are crowded environments, arranged to maximize general, not close, observation of students.*
   Being a member of a crowd is hazardous to Keesha's learning; she fades into the woodwork.

2. *They are busy places, filled with rapid interactions.*
   Rapid verbal exchanges leave Dan with a consistent residue of confusion and misunderstanding (and he equates asking questions with being stupid).

3. *Mostly driven by clock time, they rarely operate in the flow of time. And yet, despite time pressure, much of students' classroom career is spent either waiting or being interrupted.*
   Transitions and interruptions batter Nicholas' already fragile orientation in time and space. His frustration flares up when he loses his grip in time/space and, what's more, he is convinced that you take pleasure in constantly not letting him finish what he's doing.

4. *For students, classrooms are public arenas. The public spotlight can, at any moment, bare this child's failings (or that one's worthiness), making clear the official pecking order.*
   José experiences the spotlight of public attention as shame, even though you have no such intent. This perception determines his behavior during anything he senses is intended to "teach" him. Avoiding exposure is habitual now and has stunted his willingness to try.

5. *For teachers, classrooms are private domains, rarely encroached for any length of time or depth of observation by another adult.*
   The privacy of a teacher's domain confines what can be seen about what's going on. More adults, seeing from more angles, might notice that Daniel has extraordinary powers of concentration, except during reading and spelling (when he has attention deficits and behavior problems).

6. *Teacher talk predominates in classrooms, especially during times of intentional teaching. Student talk is minimal, especially during times of intentional learning.*
   In order to understand and remember content area information, both Dan and José need to talk a lot, formulating, rehearsing, and verbalizing the steps of study tasks. They need to talk just when their teacher believes that they should be quietly "working." Further, they require coaching in how to do this.

7. *Overwhelmingly, classroom instruction relies on whole group instruction, accompanied by large amounts of loosely overseen seatwork.*
   Without frequent clarifying interchanges, Keesha and Nicholas are left in the dust of group-focused lessons and semi-supervised seatwork.

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8. *The instructional focus is largely at the activity level,' with teachers' expressing satisfaction when "things are going well," with students enjoying themselves.*
   When the teacher's focus is on the activity flow, it is not evident that José is mentally on the fringes, not learning much of anything. He is terrific at engaging in an aspect of an activity that doesn't push his edges. Notably, José loves copying.

9. *Checking in on students' performance is frequent, but uneven; probing individual students' understanding, providing instructive feedback or monitoring individual progress is rare.*
   It is crucial to give Dan corrective feedback as he practices reading words and to keep weekly track of his word reading progress. Because advancement is slow and in smaller-than-common steps, both Dan and the teacher need to see the tangible traces of his learning in order to stay motivated.

These students' particular needs get inadequate attention in most general education classrooms as currently constituted. Common, often central, characteristics of classrooms are at odds with the kinds of activities, interchanges, and consistency their learning requires. While it is possible to remold classrooms to respond more effectively to Dan, José, Nicholas and Keesha, there are a number of sizable barriers to such change. One has just been outlined: "not seeing" how particular classroom features are directly affecting what happens (and doesn't happen) throughout the school day and, importantly, how changes in these features can alter classroom dynamics and learning.

Another barrier is the common belief that "including" students with learning disabilities is fundamentally a matter of ensuring that the student "fits in." By and large, teachers in general education classrooms aim for their students with learning disabilities to be well-accepted, for them to feel comfortable and to "not stick out." This translates into not wanting to treat them differently–a problematic predicament, to say the least! To even begin approaching these students' learning needs requires treating them considerably differently. For example, it will be important to:

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- ensure that Keesha and Dan actively contribute and ask questions during discussions. This will require teaching them how to ask questions, as well as changing their beliefs about the act of questioning in school (i.e., that it is mostly proof of their stupidity or a rude challenge to the teacher).

- situate Nicholas in time with a personal timer and time chart, altering how you approach him. (Perhaps: "Nick, we have Art in 5 minutes, could you set your timer for blast off?") Also, unlike others, he needs a buddy to navigate the halls, as he gets lost easily. Further, his severe math difficulties require him to work at a foundation level, with materials and procedures not used by the other students.

- handle José with extreme care to avoid his becoming wallpaper for the rest of his schooling. He may well need you to treat him very differently, making bargains about different assignments, using private hand signals to gain his assent before calling on him, arranging a period a day of unpressured work that he chooses, having a daily private conference with him.

- work intensively with both Dan and José on reading skills that your other students acquired with ease three years ago, as well as on explicit strategies for tape-recording their essays and using taped books to keep up in social studies.

These are a diverse lot of instructional strategies for a mixed bag of difficulties, strategies tailored to particular youngsters and it is a partial listing, at that. If the goal is for these youngsters to "fit in," such an array of adaptations and alterations is unnecessary. In fact, making these accommodations will expose José and company to increased public view, with attendant discomfort and embarrassment.

But, what if their learning requires these? Fitting in and learning may be at odds... not an easy situation. These students' learning requirements seem to go well beyond what is possible for one teacher to run around and meet, given the other students and priorities in the general education class. So it is understandable that teachers do not add many such adaptations to their already full plates.

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In fact, teachers in general education classrooms, even those viewed as "the cream," make minimal accommodations for students with learning disabilities and tend to sustain only those they feel benefit their entire class (e.g., graphic organizers make a topic clearer for all, extra practice helps everyone). There is a prevailing belief that treating students differently is somehow detrimental—either bad for the individual, not good for the group, or both—voiced with particular concern for "fairness." This "fairness doctrine" has the ring of one of those cultural assumptions, worthy of closer examination, given the unfair facts of classroom life.

In actual practice, neither instruction nor discipline is evenhanded in classrooms, differing along lines of gender, race, class, and more. Different students are, in fact, treated substantially differently in all classrooms. Some of this is intended, as when one student spends much time parked outside the principal's office, while another goes there only on high-prestige errands. But much is unintended, even unnoticed. As but one example of such unacknowledged differential treatment: students with learning disabilities receive decreasing academic challenges over time in general education classes. Eventually many of their teachers settle into unspoken agreements with them—"I won't demand of you, if you don't bother me." Thus, "achieving" youngsters receive a continuing diet of cognitive challenges, while many of their classmates who have learning disabilities are dished up less and less.

By high school, the latter are often like phantoms, sliding in and out of classes with little effect. And frequently this complicity is neither desired nor fully "seen" by either teacher or student.

So, in fact, fairness, in the sense of sameness of instruction, or equity of instruction, or even in the sense of "each challenged to near capacity," is not very operative in classrooms, certainly not as much as we might like to think.

So, why the staunch resistance to purposefully treating the Dans, the Josés and the others differently, resistance in the name of fairness? I'll hazard that this concern, voiced by many teachers, has to do with some implicit "rules of the game" that have been handed down via the culture of schools and probably also by the culture at large. School participants, enculturated beings, "feel" when these rules are being violated, and will commonly rush to uphold them—even when they are not in the best interests either of the individual learner or the "rest of the class." Put another way, for classrooms to more fully accommodate students with learning disabilities, it may well take a cultural shift in the current way of "doing school," a more fundamental shift in how the enterprise operates overall, not only for those few. Now that is a tall order and one requiring approaches from multiple directions.

But, wait a minute!

What about the special educators in general classrooms—the consultant teachers, team teachers, collaborators—aren't they doing the needed individual adapting? Well, that certainly is the intention, with the assumption that the special educators' "close-up kid view" will complement as well as rub off on their colleagues. As it turns out though, evidence points in the other direction: special educators, set down in the midst of general education classes, adapt to the prevailing focus on activity, activity flow, and the group's overall engagement and responsiveness. They become supportive regular classroom teachers, even generalizing their "special" advice in stereotypical, rather than kid-specific, terms.

For example:
"Semantic maps help kids with learning disabilities."

Instead of:
"Dan really has to organize his studying into semantic maps, with color cues. He can do it for stories now, but not for information, like Science News. Also, we need to get him to verbally rehearse his maps—then he really remembers! But you know, I've been watching Nicholas—and he's thoroughly confused when you put students' ideas into semantic maps on the board. We need to walk him through these on his own, making the thing very explicit verbally."

The surprising evidence that special educators in regular classrooms do not maintain this sort of student-specific focus suggests that there are sizable "cultural" forces pulling on classroom participants.

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IDEAS TO INVESTIGATE

The first step is to look with new eyes at what actually may be there to see. Special and general education colleagues could alternate roles as observer and observed to gain new views. Here are some ways that might work:

Idea 1: For one week, each take notes on how "different strokes for different folks" is both beneficial and problematic for your students. In addition to noting these when you happen to notice, also take five-minute respites from "doing," and just "be" eyes and ears noticing: Who is doing what—when—for how long? Who is actually getting how much of what? Wait till week's end before comparing notes and chewing over what you've each seen.

Idea 2: Together select just one student—Keesha, for example. Uncover what she is actually learning and how she "sees" things at various times during the day. Observe her during whole-class discussions, during paired work, and as she works on her own. But also remember to interview her, caringly probing for what she actually came away with from a discussion, what she remained confused about. Assume that up until now you have only seen 10 percent of who she is and what she's learning. Try constructing a fuller portrait (80%?) of Keesha as a learner. Again, share your notes at week's end. Does your new picture point to changes you can make for her?

Idea 3: If everybody is to learn and make their best progress, then they will all need somewhat different amounts and somewhat different ingredients. Learning and progress are the goals that your students need to buy into. Brainstorm (with colleagues and/or your students) ways to reorient classroom activities so that "different strokes for different folks" is viewed as a value in pursuit of learning. Try one of the ideas for six weeks, supporting one another as the experiment unfolds.

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To recap: Currently, many general education classrooms make little adaptation to the individual characteristics of students with learning disabilities. It seems that adding adaptations as "one more thing you have to do," is largely unworkable. Some broader change or restructuring of how classrooms operate seems called for. But, remolding classrooms is not simple, involving something like a "cultural shift." Formidable, though not impossible, this is rather like rearranging the living room with an invisible elephant in the middle—the more you "see" where it is, the less it tramples your efforts.

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN SCHOOLS AND CLASSROOMS UNDERGO A SUSTAINED PROCESS OF CHANGE AND ARE STRUCTURED SIGNIFICANTLY DIFFERENTLY?

What effects are visible then? And what are the effects for students with learning disabilities? (Does a rising tide lift all boats?)

Increasing numbers of schools are embarking on a restructuring journey, attempting to radically alter classroom ecologies–a far from simple matter, as you may have noted by now. Few of the current school change efforts have both longevity and detailed data about the effects of their alterations.

Our classroom ecologies symposium gathered an impressive collection of educators from widely different teacher/researcher collaborations. Their diverse ways of reshaping classrooms over several years all include documenting, from multiple perspectives, both the processes of teacher and classroom change and ensuing effects on students.

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A sampling of these programs' styles:

- One reorganized around kindling students' sense of ownership and motivation in equal measure with securing basic skills, a social/constructivist point of departure.
- One reorganized into peer tutoring pairs, maintaining a detailed behavioral focus on student engagement.
- Another used schoolwide "inclusion" of students with learning disabilities as the occasion for reorienting teachers' roles, grouping, and use of time.
- Still another transformed how teachers and students converse about stories as its focal change in teaching/learning.

As far-flung as Kansas City and Honolulu, Pittsburgh and Los Angeles, the schools included many at-risk children from poor areas who were not doing well in school, as well as children with learning disabilities. The researchers spent extended time in classrooms. Teachers and researchers also carved out time for ongoing dialogue, jointly reflecting on day-to-day classroom details and reworking their efforts.

The process of intentional classroom change undertaken in these very different projects was slow-going, painstaking, and fascinating. The heartening news is that substantial and significant change is possible. High levels of student engagement and learning were maintained in programs with very different orienting premises and schooling styles. The performance of many poor-achieving children was turned around, with notable progress evidenced not only in test scores, but also in work samples, systematic observation, and improvements in later schooling. Real changes in the complex "ecology" of classrooms can have powerful effects.

The seismic shifts these programs brought about provide some invaluable lessons:

- The ecology of a classroom has a tremendous effect on student learning.

- For changes to take root in classroom teaching and learning, nourishment is required on several levels simultaneously: on the level of the teacher's personal development, on the interpersonal level between teachers, and on the broader level of the school.

- The link between teaching activities and learning is key. That means looking at the effects of teaching efforts and instructional activities—probing and tracking, in multiple ways, what the students are getting out of lessons, discussions, practice, independent work, partner learning, cooperative groups, etc. The point is to see much more clearly the actuality of what is being learned, in order to provide responsive feedback and to adjust teaching tactics.

- While it is important to focus systematically on short-term effects, it is just as important to consider outcomes over the long haul. Some significant changes will bear fruit in a later season. For example, developing productive cooperative learning skills in the early school years can have profound effects on later instructional interactions.

- Often there is an "in-between" stage as schools embark on a process of significant change. On the road to being more effective, as old ways fade and before new ways are well-established, frequently there is a less effective time that must be lived through.

And yet, despite the major gains for many children in these programs, there is more to the picture. While the "bottom," poor-achieving groups shrank dramatically, they were not eliminated—an alert that it is not enough to address learning environments only; we must also examine individual learners in greater depth. While serious shifts in classroom interchanges and organization seem clearly the first order of business for better student outcomes, those shifts—hard as they are— remain insufficient. There simply is not a single, simple, or definitive answer to the question: How do we make schooling fully effective?

Evidence is incomplete regarding how students with learning disabilities fared in all of these schools or what the distinctive characteristics were of those children who remained poor achievers. So, clearly, there is more of this story yet to tell. But, given available evidence, apparently a rising tide does not lift all boats. While some students with learning disabilities benefit from restructured general education classrooms, others do not, or do so only minimally, with a widening gap between them and their classmates. That means that they start out behind and, over time, get further behind. And their unaddressed needs become compounded problems. The implications for this minority of students are significant:

1. Special attention to students with learning disabilities remains warranted, even within learning environments reorganized to be effective with a greater diversity of learners.

2. General education classrooms may not be adequate or appropriate for all students with learning disabilities at all stages of their schooling. While the walls of general education classrooms can flex, their elasticity has bounds. A range of alternative settings and programs must be available for those children who need them.

3. The lessons and understandings gleaned from looking under the covers of general education classrooms are useful in exploring what is (and is not) going on in special education resource rooms and separate class settings. The same questions apply.

INVESTIGATE THE ECOLOGIES OF SPECIAL CLASS SETTINGS:

The lenses suggested for viewing general education classrooms can reveal much about special settings as well. Try any of the previously suggested observations and trials within a resource room or a self-contained special class for students with learning disabilities.

- How is time used?
- Is whole group instruction the norm?
- What kind of feedback is provided—to whom, how often?
- How much is individual understanding probed?
- What are the learning effects of teaching efforts?
- How are the steps of learning tracked?
- What adaptations to individual students' needs are in evidence?
- How do students and teachers view different folks needing different strokes?
- How do students view their difficulties and their talents?

Looking under the covers of any cultural enterprise is a delicate business, one fraught with resistance. And it is understandable when teachers hesitate to look much beyond the flow of an activity and their students' enthusiasm. Rousing kids' interest and keeping them engaged can represent such a feat that refocusing on the particulars of what individual students are actually learning (and not learning) can feel overwhelming, or disheartening.

Kids feel the same way. They don't want to look too closely when rumblings tell them their inadequacy will be exposed. Often they balk at stretching their capacities in school, fearful of reaching the edge of the known. "Covering-up" is a commonplace reaction and a major obstacle to learning. In fact, by mid-second grade, many students with learning disabilities feel acutely vulnerable to ridicule and have already adopted complex cover-ups. And, certainly, there is much cultural support for showing off the "good stuff" and concealing the "bad," which often includes that with which we most need help.

It is not easy to change classroom norms regarding the "badness" (irksomeness, stupidity, unworthiness) associated with making mistakes, not knowing how to do something, having difficulty, and asking for help. To affect a real change of perspective around these, reaching all the way down to the kid-culture level, requires building new routines into everyday classroom life, so the changes are redundant in word and deed. It is not enough to outlaw put-downs and ridicule, although zero tolerance for these can be part of establishing an environment that is safe for learning.

Changing perspectives and behavior regarding mistakes, not knowing, and problems is no small matter because of the host of subtle, and not so subtle, negative expressions that form our common norms. Take but one small example—the commonplace two-word phrase, "That's easy." As frequently used by teachers, parents and children, this phrase signals —"for anyone but a dummy"—"Everyone else (worth anything) can do that,"—"If you don't find it easy, better stuff it or suffer public shame." The highly charged commentary, "That's easy," conveys a commonly-held negative take on difficulties, and it is but one in a myriad of ways that this social slant is expressed and reinforced.

Evidently, making inroads regarding such perspectives will require sturdy shoes, companionship, persistence, and a fair amount of looking for elephants. In addition, setting out with clear notions about what you want to shift classroom and school norms to will be important, so that when the going gets rough, you and your compatriots can return to these and plot again your strategies.

IDEAS TO INVESTIGATE

Below are suggestions for shifts in classroom's "messages" regarding mistakes, difficulties, effort, and seeking help. Perhaps these can be a useful starting point for discussions with colleagues. Are these desirable shifts? Do they need reworking? Are there more ?

It is good, fine, OK:

- to get things wrong, trip up, make mistakes. (We all do and it is a valuable part of learning.)
- to not know something, or not know how to do something... yet. (We each have our own timetable, with effort and help, we get there.)
- to stick with what we each find difficult. (That's called courage. We all have different things that are hard for us and for which we need courage.)
- to get and to give help when needed. (Everyone needs help and can be of help.)

Can you feel the counter pull – how these suggested "goods" are significantly at odds with many messages that children are given about not-knowing, mis-stepping, doing "easy stuff," and revealing that they are having difficulty?

In concert with a colleague or two, plot concrete ways to reframe how mistakes, difficulty, effort and help are viewed.

How can you make the new messages redundant, building the new views:

- into what you say every day
- into classroom/school routines
- into what gets reinforced by class/school procedures?

Do you show your students mistakes you make, your difficulties, efforts, and need for help? Do you talk to them about these—as signs of learning, of courage, even of heroism?

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And what about you and me when we trip up, don't know, have trouble, or need help? What are the messages in and around us? How often do we inhibit our own development as teachers out of fear of exposure?

WHAT MAKES CHANGING SCHOOLS AND CLASSROOMS (AMONG OTHER SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS) SO DIFFICULT?

Does changing a classroom or a school involve changing a whole cultural system? (Well, yes.) What does that mean? How does a classroom/school culture change?

A school's culture is the largely unseen shape of things—adaptive patterns of perceiving, interpreting, interacting and doing, embodied in the routinized details of daily classroom life. The culture's in the details.

Schools are cultural systems and what cultural systems do is stabilize and regulate human activities, providing blueprints for incoming social participants. Within the school cultural system, activities are elaborately organized, with built-in redundancies that maintain this way of doing things. That accounts for the pull we feel when trying another way of doing things.

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In a sense, the whole school enterprise at all levels, from district office to kindergarten block corner, is bent on resisting change (the elephants are obstinate). On the other hand, since cultural systems and subsystems are means of adapting to circumstances, they are also obliged to evolve, like it or not. So, the trick is to hook into your school culture's tendency to perpetuate itself, alter some tangible routines at the evolving edges, and deliberately build in your own redundancies— in collusion with other participants in the system. Cultural change is not a solo activity.

Culture is always local. While cultural processes are generalizable, "how things are" is always experienced as locally specific. This means that changes are resisted with reference to local particulars (e.g., "Well, maybe they do that in Kansas, but it just won't work here.") It also means that changes won't take root if the details of local soil and conditions are not taken into account. As an example, one researcher discovered by fluke the sustaining power of food in the school change process, the tremendous local significance of her bringing a home-cooked dish to an early planning session with the teachers. The response propelled this down-home gesture into a project tradition. One teacher's comment captures the local significance of this simple act of caring: "In this school, it has been so us/them, with no amenities to show basic respect for our professionalism. So, when Ann brought home-cooking every time we met, it filled our hearts, not just our stomachs... such respect she was showing." Apparently the culture is in the recurrent details—and those are always local.

IDEAS TO INVESTIGATE

Take a fixture of school culture – report cards, for example. Many teacher teams have of late been fooling around with their report card format, working at this evolving edge to promote changes in their school's norms. A significant cultural shift can occur when report cards expand to include students' own articulated reflections on their efforts, their relationships and their progress.

And, you could build in redundancy through related monthly and weekly activities that focus systematically on strengths and weaknesses. (Charts like those below need not be restricted to students, but can be used by teachers, principals, etc., as well.)

There could be a monthly Target Chart

a) Talent - The talent I am going to develop this month:
b) Weakness - The weakness I am going to strengthen this month:
c) Self-Help - What I need to do for myself:
d) Needs - What help I need from other people:

And a weekly (or even daily) Progress Plotter

a) How far did I get on my talent?
b) How far did I get on my weakness?
c) What kind of effort did I make on my own behalf?
d) What kind of help did I get from other people?

But report cards, or related self-knowledge charts, are only examples. What concrete plans could you make to hitch changes onto an established routine of school culture?

- How about radically altering who talks and how during story discussions, getting students to probe each other, the text, and you?
- How about reorganizing for daily peer tutoring?
- How about developing portfolios of student work?
- How about your own ideas?

WHAT DO STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES REALLY NEED?

Symposium participants returned often to this question, posing it from different angles, seeking to clarify our understandings, reminding ourselves to stay focused on the target. There was consensus that learning disabilities is an enduring condition with manifestations that vary across individuals and over time. While the condition doesn't go away (or get fixed), its academic impact and emotional complications can be significantly ameliorated. There was also agreement about what it takes for students with learning disabilities to thrive as learners: effort—persistent, properly-focused effort on the part of many people, sustained over the long haul.

José, Dan, and the others are all youngsters with learning disabilities. Their learning problems are serious, as are the compounding effects of their being frequently misunderstood. Each faces a different set of difficulties, with a different profile of strength. Because of widely disparate personalities, they respond differently when encountering their disabilities in the daily struggle of school. They draw on different resources and deploy a variety of protective strategies.

José is charming, avoiding challenges at all costs, quietly sidestepping yet another humiliation. Dan is persistent, despite his tearful rages of frustration. Keesha is passive, frowning as she tucks her thoughts and needs out of sight. Nicholas is hyper-talkative, often perplexed by ordinary events around him. None of these children readily talks about the difficulties they are having, some of which they are acutely aware, others of which they experience only dimly. To some extent, each has internalized the misunderstandings of others, agreeing that yes, they are lazy, stupid, lamebrained and not worth very much. But it remains a puzzlement to them when people repeatedly and blithely say that they are "just not trying."

Youngsters with learning disabilities have in common the need for focused, intensive, and consistent instruction in more than one area of basic academic skill. In addition, many of them have a striking lack of general knowledge, despite being curious, lively kids with IQs in the normal range. Each needs concepts recycled, vocabulary clarified, an extraordinary amount of focused practice, and frequent help extracting what's important. Each must put in two to three times the time and effort of their classmates to achieve an adequate level of performance.

To develop long-term coping skills, students with learning disabilities need "significant others" to show them enduring understanding and encouragement. As the demands of school change over the grades, they are posed new obstacles and need to rely not only on hard-won skills, but also on a willingness to identify trouble spots, seek help, and use available supports, including compensations. They will need to understand themselves well.

To make adequate progress, students with learning disabilities require more of this and different of that. Can the general education classroom be reshaped to allow for these youngsters to learn, not simply to find a social niche?

Special education is meant to be the marshaling of appropriately focused responses to individual students' educational needs. It is not a place, although the characteristics of place are clearly consequential, as the forgoing scenarios have revealed. The ecologies of classrooms profoundly affect how and whether youngsters with learning disabilities will thrive. For this reason, it is important for parents, teachers, and school systems to gauge particular environments for particular students, remembering that needs shift with age and other developments.

As students with learning disabilities are individually considered for appropriate educational placement, services and strategies, it is useful to ask:

Appropriate for what?

For supporting social integration?
For securing an adequate foundation of skills and knowledge?
For engaging in work that is challenging, but not out of reach (within the zone of proximal development)?
For revealing needs and working on weaknesses?
For learning increasingly adaptive strategies of attending, organizing, and remembering?
For developing social relations and social skills?
For increasing self-reliance?
For developing the skills, compensations, and interpersonal tools needed to carry on a productive adult life?

WHAT ARE THE RIGHTFUL PURPOSES OF SPECIAL EDUCATION FOR STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES?

All of these? Most of them? In what balance? By what means? There cannot be one answer to these queries. It all depends on the particular child, the specifics of the settings, the pliability of the classroom ecology, the focus and efforts of the teachers. Additionally, what is "right" for Keesha or Dan, Nicholas or José when each of them is six years old may be a significantly different balance at age ten, or again at age fourteen.

How do we go about forging school environments that adequately provide for students with learning disabilities as their needs change over time?

As schools take on the exciting, and painstaking, tasks involved in real change, how do we keep an eye out for those children who may still need something more and somewhat different?

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The questions keep coming back, nagging. And that's useful, reminding us that there is always more to the elephant than meets the eye. And, clearly, these questions are for you, as well as for us. In fact, they are probably most valuable in your hands as, day by day, you shape your classroom and your school culture.

Pausing to pose questions such as these as you go about your daily pursuits, perhaps you can see more of what is actually occurring. A most imperfect process, this—but still, one that can reveal much that is useful—and interesting.

SOME CONCLUSIONS

Our symposium offered valuable information from long-term systematic research programs, as well as from those sharply glinting "kid" experiences each of us has lived. By this little volume, I've sought to convey the information and inquiries that propelled our conversations. For all of us, these inquiries were in the service of teachers and their students in schools, offered with profound respect for your daily work.

As symposium participants pooled information and views, a number of themes kept reemerging:

- We have nowhere near all the answers. So, do not believe you are alone with an inadequate store of solutions.

- Schooling is enormously complex. Even so, there is information available that can be of use. So, take heart. You need not make it all up—although, as always, you will have to artfully select and fit solutions to your local culture.

- Teachers are the key agents of change; the locus of change is the mundane routine of daily classroom life. So, look closely at the effects of those commonplace routines. What you do day-to-day absolutely does make a difference.

- Sustaining unfamiliar ways of doing things is not a solo activity. So, seek partnership everywhere, with colleagues, kids, parents—even researchers— conspiring to view more of the elephant. And that means keep talking about what's happening and how you see it; what you're doing and why, what confuses you and how your efforts go awry. And keep asking. Questions can open possibilities and loosen the grip of "doing-things-that-way-because-that's-the-way-they're-done."

- Resistance is a central feature of the landscape. So, stop, look and listen as resisting arises, whether in you, your students, or at a team meeting. And consider, what's there? What can it tell you?

F O L L O W - U P

There were questions within questions, any of which might be useful to consider further. Perhaps a question could begin fruitful talks between teachers, between teachers and students. with parents, with educational researchers, or with any stakeholders in this complex enterprise. Questions ringing of "controversy" can be particularly interesting, recognizable when the mind answers back: "But... but... how can you ask that!" Look out, perhaps you've hit an elephant. Pose the question again, trying to catch the cultural assumption, belief or bandwagon that may be obstructing the view.

Or perhaps something from the discussions rather than the questions can fuel conversations on how to leverage change so that more students learn more. Perhaps you found a portrait, an assertion, an idea of particular interest, arguable, or evoking the laughter of recognition.

With conviction that teachers and schools can make a difference, this symposium set out to seek the elephant in our midst, reflecting on each other's partial representation of how things are. With realism regarding the incremental nature of sustainable change, we listened intently to each other's stories from the trunk, the tail, the flank, forging conversation. Here you have listened in. Perhaps you will begin conversations within your local culture, using our yeast as starter for your own baking, gathering in small groups for sustaining exchanges.

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SPECIAL THANKS

Special thanks to our conference coordinator, Karen Sue Zoeller, at the Texas Education Agency and to Forrest Novy and Barbara Marshall at the Texas Education Agency for their work in preparing and producing this document.

N O T E

Not all information bearing on these questions found its way from the symposium into this guide. More can be uncovered in the symposium proceedings, *Research on Classroom Ecologies: Implications for the Inclusion of Children with Learning Disabilities*, edited by Deborah Speece and Barbara Keogh and published by Lawrence Erlbaum (1996). This collection marshals evidence from long-term, school-based research as well as from practicing teachers. With insights and information for both teachers and researchers, the volume offers creative ways that the work of each can inform and improve the work of the other.